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ABSTRACT

This study determined if the relationship between teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness differed for traditional undergraduate students and non-traditional adult learners. Subjects, 192 traditional undergraduate students and 167 non-traditional adult learners, provided teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness ratings for instructors. Results of stepwise mutiple regression analysis indicated that different communication style variables predicted teacher effectiveness in the two groups of students. Results also indicated that teacher communication style accounted for more variation in teacher effectiveness in the adult learners (64%) than in the traditional undergraduates (43%). (Seven footnotes, 10 references, and 1 table of data are included.) (RS)

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Communication style and teacher effectiveness: A comparative study of the perceptions of adult learners and traditional undergraduate students[1]

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Communication style and teacher effectiveness: A comparative study of the perceptions of adult learners and traditional undergraduate students

Abstract

A considerable amount of research has examined the relationship between teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness. This research indicates that effective teachers are perceived to be friendly, attentive, dramatic, relaxed, and open communicators. What this developing body of literature does not reveal, however, is the extent to which the relationship between teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness is influenced by characteristics of the students evaluating the instructor. Can one assume, for example, that communication style variables that predict teacher effectiveness in one classroom will predict it in another, particularly when the students in those classrooms differ socially and psychologically? The present study seeks to answer this question. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to determine if the relationship between teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness differed for traditional undergraduate students and non-traditional adult learners.

One hundred and ninety-two traditional undergraduate students and 167 non-traditional adult learners served as subjects for this study. Subjects provided teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness ratings for instructors. The instructors in this study taught classes composed of either traditional undergraduate students or non-traditional adult learners.

Results of stepwise multiple regression analyses revealed that different communication style variables predicted teacher effectiveness in the two groups of students. Furthermore, teacher communication style accounted for more variation in teacher effectiveness in the adult learners (64%) than in the traditional undergraduates (43%).

Communication style and teacher effectiveness: A comparative study of the perceptions of adult learners and traditional undergraduate students

Rationale

According Norton (1983), communication style refers to "the way one verbally, nonverbally, and paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood." Research indicates that teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness are meaningfully related. Teachers who are perceived as friendly, relaxed, dramatic, attentive and open communicators, for example, are also perceived to be effective teachers (see Andersen, Norton & Nussbaum, 1979; Norton, 1977; Norton & Nussbaum, 1980; Nussbaum, Comadena & Holladay, 1987; Scott & Nussbaum, 1981).

This developing body of literature, because it has focused primarily upon what may be called "traditional" undergraduate students, has not addressed a very important question: To what extent is the relationship between teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness influenced by characteristics of the students evaluating the instructors? In other words, do different communication style variables predict teacher effectiveness for different student audiences? The answer to this question may have both practical and theoretical significance.

Norton (1983) notes that a number of contextual, situational, and temporal factors associated with an

interaction may affect the communication styles exhibited by interactants. In other words, different classroom contexts may affect the communication styles displayed by teachers. If different classroom contexts elicit different communication styles from teachers, it is possible, then, that different communication style variables predict teacher effectiveness in different classrooms. And a key contextual dimension of the classroom is the student in that classroom. The present study explores the relationship between teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness in samples of traditional undergraduate and non-traditional, adult learners.[2]

Comparative studies of adult learners and traditional undergraduate students have revealed a number of important differences in these two student groups, differences which may have implications for instructors regarding the way they should interact in the classroom. Research has revealed that, in addition to being older, adult learners, compared to traditional undergraduate students, have different needs, concerns, and expectations regarding the teacher and the instructional process (see Comadena, Semlak, Looney, & Escott, 1988). Malcolm Knowles (1978), an expert in the study of adult education, contends that adult learners take an active role in the learning process (i.e., they actively participate in class activities and they actively seek to

apply knowledge acquired in class). Knowles (1978) maintains that adult learners prefer a learning climate that shows a concern for the student-teacher communication.

> ...the psychological climate should be one which causes adults to feel accepted, respected, and supported; in which there exists a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers; in which there is freedom of expression without fear of punishment or ridicule. People tend to feel more "adult" in an atmosphere that is friendly and informal, in which they are known by name and valued as unique individuals, than in the traditional school atmosphere of formality, semianonymity, and status differentiation between teacher and student (Knowles, 1978, p. 47).

Based upon Knowles' (1978) writings, there is a clear implication for instructors regarding their classroom communication styles. Instructors who are capable of creating an open, friendly, informal atmosphere are likely to be perceived by adult learners as effective teachers.

The purpose of this study, then, was to compare traditional and adult learners' perceptions of teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness. A primary goal of this study was to determine if the results of past research on teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness involving traditional undergraduate students can be generalized to adult learners. A second objective was to generate information that may assist instructors working with adult learners. The following research

question was addressed in this study:

> Do different communication style variables predict teacher effectiveness for traditional students and adult learners?

Methods

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 192 traditional undergraduate students (76 males, 111 females; 5 did not report their sex) and 167 adult learners (46 males, 119 females; 2 did not report their sex) enrolled in a variety of courses at a large midwestern university. The average age of the undergraduate students was 21.72 years (std dev=4.72). The average age of the adult learners was 36.50 years (std dev=8.86). The two groups were significantly different in age ($t=-21.49$, $df=345$, $p=.000$).

Measurement

Teacher communication style was assessed by Norton's Communicator Style Measure (CSM; Norton, 1983). This instrument contains 45 Likert-type items designed to measure the way one verbally and nonverbally interacts with others. The CSM operationally defines communicator style in terms of 11 subconstructs: friendly, impression leaving, relaxed, contentious, attentive, precise, animated, dramatic, open, dominant, and communicator image. That is, the CSM assesses the extent to which an individual is animated, dramatic,

open, relaxed, etc., in his or her communications with others. Each subconstruct has 4 items on the CSM, except for communicator image which has 5 items. Total scores on the subconstructs were utilized in the statistical analyses reported later in this report. Subconstruct scores were computed by simply adding the respective items for each subconstruct. While the CSM was originally designed as a self-report scale, items can be re-worded to permit observers to rate the communication style of another (see Norton, 1983). Data regarding the reliability and validity of the CSM are reported in Norton (1978; 1983). In the present study, the 45-item CSM had an internal reliability estimate of .91 (Cronbach's alpha).[3]

Teacher effectiveness was measured with the following 5 items (see Nussbaum, 1982): (1) My instructor motivates me to do my best work; (2) My instructor explains difficult material clearly; (3) Course assignments are interesting and stimulating; (4) Overall, this is among the best courses I have ever taken; and (5) Overall, this instructor is among the best teachers I have ever known. These five items have been used to operationally define teacher effectiveness in past studies of teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness. Students were asked to report the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a 5-point scale. Students' ratings on these 5 items were summed

to produce a single teacher effectiveness score. This 5-item instrument had an internal reliability estimate of .89 (Cronbach's alpha).

Procedures

Instructors teaching both adult learners and traditional undergraduate students were asked to administer a questionnaire containing the CSM, the teacher effectiveness scales, and several demographic questions. Instructors were asked to create and provide their students with a 5-digit code number that could be used to match responses of traditional students with adult learners for a particular instructor.[4] Students were assured that their responses would remain confidential. Confidentiality was preserved by having students return their completed questionnaires directly to the researchers in a self-addressed, stamped envelop provided to them.[5]

Statistical Analysis

To answer the research question, stepwise multiple regression analysis was performed where teacher effectiveness served as the criterion variable and 10 subconstructs of the CSM served as predictor variables.[6] Separate prediction systems were develop for adult learners and traditional undergraduate students. Alpha was set at .05 for all tests of significance.

Results

Stepwise multiple regression analyses revealed that different communication style variables predicted teacher effectiveness for the two groups of students. For the traditional undergraduate students, the best predictors of teacher effectiveness were impression leaving, friendly, and attentive. These three predictors accounted for approximately 43% of the variance in the teacher effectiveness variable. See Table 1 for a summary of the regression analysis for the traditional undergraduates.

For the adult learners, the best predictors of teacher effectiveness were the impression leaving, friendly, relaxed, attentive, dominant, and precise style variables. These six predictors accounted for approximately 64% of the variance in teacher effectiveness. See Table 1 for a summary of the regression analysis for the adult learners.

To assist in interpreting the results of the regression analyses, teacher effectiveness ratings were compared for the two groups of students. A t-test revealed that adult learners (mean=17.95) did not differ from traditional undergraduates (mean=18.72) in their evaluations of teacher effectiveness ($t=-1.62$, $df=357$, $p=.107$).

Discussion

The research question guiding this investigation asked whether different communication style variables predict teacher effectiveness for traditional students and adult learners? The results of multiple regression analysis revealed that, in these two groups of students, different communication style variables do indeed predict teacher effectiveness, even though the two groups did not differ in their perceptions of teacher effectiveness. For the traditional students, teacher effectiveness was positively related to the impression leaving, friendly, and attentive communicator style subconstructs, with the impression leaving and the friendly style variables accounting for the most of the variation in students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness (see Table 1). Thus, traditional students perceive instructors who communicate in a non-hostile, confirming, and memorable manner to be effective teachers.

For the adult learners, teacher effectiveness was positively related to impression leaving, friendly, relaxed, and precise style subconstructs, and negatively related to the dominant style subconstruct. The impression leaving, friendly, and relaxed style subconstructs accounted for most of the variation in teacher effectiveness ratings. Adult learners, then, perceive teachers who leave a lasting impression on those with whom they communicate, and who

appear friendly and relaxed as communicators, as effective teachers.

The results of the regression analyses reported above are, in some ways, consistent with past research (see Norton, 1977). In the present study and in Norton's investigation, the impression leaving style variable was found to be strongest predictor of teacher effectiveness. According to Norton (1977), impression leaving "centers around what is said and the way it is said" (p. 540). Instructors who carefully select material for classroom communication and present that material in a manner that promotes retention of the material and the teacher are effective teachers.

Further comparing the results of the present study with those reported by Norton (1977), one will note that, once impression leaving enters into the prediction equation, different style variables enter to account for unique variation in teacher effectiveness. When Norton predicted teacher effectiveness ratings from students' evaluations of teacher communication style, impression leaving, attentive, relaxed, dominant, friendly, and precise styles were found to be significant predictors, accounting for approximately 47% of the variation in teacher effectiveness ratings. For the traditional undergraduates in this study (see Table 1), only impression leaving, friendly, and attentive styles

entered the equation; these three variables accounted for approximately 43% of the variation in teacher effectiveness ratings. These differences may be attributed to differences in samples studied.[7]

Perhaps the most intriguing finding in this research is the relative importance that teacher communication style plays in predicting teacher effectiveness for the two groups of students. Recall that for traditional undergraduate students, the communicator style subconstructs accounted for approximately 43% of the variation in teacher effectiveness ratings, whereas teacher communicator style accounted for approximately 67% of the variation in adult learners' perceptions of teacher effectiveness. These figures indicate that the way in which a instructor communicates with adult learners is very important. Adult learners view teacher communication behaviors as a more important component of teacher effectiveness than traditional undergraduate students. Obviously, faculty who teach adult learners should be sensitive to the way in which they interact with students in the classroom. Teacher communication style is very important to adult learners.

Footnotes

1. The data reported in this paper were also presented in a paper presented at the annual convention of the National Conference on Quality in Off-campus Credit Programs, New Orleans, October, 1989.

2. Malcolm Knowles' (1978) definition of adult is used in this report. An adult is one who performs adult roles (i.e., worker, spouse, parent, responsible citizen) and whose self-concept is that of an adult.

3. An analysis of the reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) for the 10 subconstructs of the CSM revealed the following: friendly (.77); impression leaving (.85); relaxed (.82); contentious (.60); attentive (.70); precise (.56); animated (.49); dramatic (.73); open (.62); dominant (.63); and communicator image (78). Although some of these reliabilities appear low, they are not unexpected since only 4 items are used to define each construct and a short scale range (1 to 5) is used for each item (see Norton, 1978). Thus all subconstructs were utilized in the statistical analyses reported in this paper.

4. Instructors for this study came from a number of different academic departments in the university. However, we cannot say with any certainty how many different instructors participated in the study. The 5-digit coding system used to preserve the anonymity of the data did not work as planned. We received a number of questionnaires that did not have an identification number. Some questionnaires contained identification numbers that had no matches.

5. A copy of the actual questionnaire used in this study may be obtained by writing the first author.

6. In Norton's operationalization of communicator style, communicator image is a dependent variable. Since the purpose of the present study was to predict teacher effectiveness, and not communicator image, the communicator image variable was not incorporated in any of the regression analyses.

7. The subjects in Norton's (1977) were not described. We assume they were what we have termed traditional undergraduate students.

Table 1

Summary of Stepwise Regression Analyses

Predictors: Communicator style subconstructs--friendly, impression leaving, relaxed, contentious, attentive, precise, animated, dramatic, open, dominant.

Criterion: Teacher effectiveness

Traditional Undergraduate Students (n=192)

Step	Variable entered	R-square	Beta	F	p
1	Impression leaving	.32	.34	87.80	.000
2	Friendly	.40	.22	63.40	.000
3	Attentive	.43	.22	46.87	.000

Adult Learners (n=167)

Step	Variable entered	R-square	Beta	F	p
1	Impression leaving	.47	.36	146.32	.000
2	Friendly	.57	.24	110.09	.000
3	Relaxed	.60	.14	81.70	.000
4	Attentive	.61	.17	64.46	.000
5	Dominant	.63	-.16	54.49	.000
6	Precise	.64	.12	47.03	.000

Note: Table reports final beta values when all significant variables are in the equation.

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